

Why This Book?

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Children dropping out of school has been an ongoing problem for decades. Approximately 7,000 students in the United States drop out of high school every day (Barrington, 2023; Serani, 2020). When a student drops out, it impacts the school, community, nation, and especially the student and their family. Knowing this, school personnel have implemented many different initiatives to reduce the dropout rates in their schools. Unfortunately, the dropout rates continue to be far too high. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2024), “in 2022, there were 2.1 million status dropouts between the ages of 16 and 24.” This increase was partially because of the effect the pandemic had on education, but it would be unfair to blame the current crisis entirely on COVID-19. This book was written to provide a wake-up call to professional educators to think about why the dropout crisis is continuing and provide more impactful interventions to address it.

I have read many books about school dropouts written by current and former educators who had a wealth of experience working with students. These educators offered insightful advice to teachers, counselors, and other school personnel. I admire these and others who have invested many years in the field of education and have so much experience to share with educators who are struggling with how to help a new generation of students stay in school. I have noticed, however, that almost all the authors who have written about dropout prevention and truancy initiatives have not actually experienced what it is like to struggle to stay in school and the challenges that follow. This book has been heavily influenced by my own personal experience as a former school dropout. I have included several stories about the challenges I faced and eventually overcame and added helpful insights and suggestions. In addition, I include stories and learnings from other school dropouts. My personal story of dropping out is

intertwined throughout the book. In the last chapter, I provide readers with the rest of my story.

I have included stories and insights about the early warning signs of dropping out, which often start in elementary school. This information can be helpful in identifying ways school personnel can take action in helping to prevent young students from dropping out in the future. I also wanted to share some of the knowledge I gained while working as a middle school dropout prevention counselor, as a Title I counselor for incarcerated youth, and as a high school counselor.

I deeply believe we need to revisit how schools are addressing the problem of dropping out and incorporate fresh interventions that can reach all students. It is important for our young people to believe that regardless of who they are, where they come from, or what they have done, they are welcome in our schools, we believe in them and their potential, and we have their backs!

Even with decades of research and many actionable attempts to address the dropout crisis, this issue continues to be a chronic problem. We owe it to our children to do more to help them survive in school and thrive in our society by providing improved opportunities to access advanced education, better employment, and subsequently, quality of life. We gain many benefits from investing more wisely in our young people's educational experiences. Such initiatives have the potential to save our country up to \$200 billion per year over the course of these young peoples' lifetimes (Hale & Canter, 2023).

This book is written primarily for those who work directly with students at high risk, such as school counselors, social workers, mental health professionals, nurses, school administrators, behavioral specialists, dropout prevention personnel, ISS (in-school suspension) facilitators, and any others who work directly with students. Classroom teachers can also gain some insights and strategies from this book to help them better understand and make connections with these students. I hope this book provides you with some unique perspectives that will help you have a more substantial impact on these students.

My Personal Story

Since I was in third grade, I felt a noticeable disconnection with school. I struggled with a learning disability throughout my elementary years and never felt that I belonged. By the time I entered fifth grade, I started

to avoid going to school. It didn't help that my family had experienced several traumatic events while I was still in elementary school: When I was 12 years old my father was diagnosed with schizophrenia and was committed to a state mental hospital. I also had an older sister who almost died when she was 15 years old from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Today, these would be labeled as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), which we now have learned can contribute to chronic absenteeism and may eventually lead to dropping out.

I would try anything to stay home and avoid school. Pretending to be sick occasionally worked, but after several times the school nurse insisted my parents take me for a physical checkup. The doctor determined that nothing was physically wrong with me to keep me from going to school. Chronic absenteeism was not as common in the late 1960s. My small elementary school in the northeast of the United States lacked the knowledge of how to deal with a student who was chronically skipping school. We did not have a counselor in our school or anyone else who I felt I could really talk to. So, when pretending to be sick stopped working, I just acted like I was going to school and hid out in my yard or in our carport outside. In fifth grade I missed so many days of school I was told I needed to repeat the grade, which just added to my discouragement. I somehow survived and made it through elementary school, and the next year I started the seventh grade at the only middle school in our small town.

By the time I was 13, I started to become involved in more risky and defiant behavior. I began smoking cigarettes and marijuana and started drinking alcohol. I became more interested in boys but was a late bloomer and felt boys were not attracted to me. My friends and I would hang out on the weekends at a "drop-in" center that was for teens. How ironic that name was, when many who went there ended up "dropping out." Kids my age would meet and hang out there, but under adult supervision. I met a guy there who would change my entire life! Kevin was five years older than I and had dropped out of school. He wore bell-bottom jeans and had an earring and long, blond hair. He was different—and just the kind of guy who attracted me. Of course, I was also excited to have an older guy attracted to me. He seemed very caring at first, but over time he pressured me into having sex with him. After this happened, I felt like I now "belonged" to him instead of being in an amicable girlfriend/boyfriend relationship. My parents tried their best to keep me from seeing him, but I would sneak out of our house late at night. Kevin encouraged me to skip school; I would arrive at the

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front entrance of the school and just walk out a back or side door, where I would meet up with him and we would go to the woods across the street. After skipping school on a regular basis, he eventually convinced me to leave my family and run away with him so we could live without my parents interfering in our relationship. It sounded like a great escape into a new world of adventure. Little did I know that I was now entrusting myself into the hands of an emotionally troubled person who had already impregnated another girl my age.

During this time, I felt like I had slipped into a deep, dark hole and I did not see a ladder to help me climb out. I had set off on an unforeseen journey over which I had no control. Fortunately, through intensive and continual effort and support from several sources, I was able to eventually turn my life around. My journey took me from dropping out of eighth grade and running away from home, to eventually obtaining a graduate degree and becoming a licensed therapist, author, and international presenter. More about this part of my story can be found later in the book.

I have gained many insights about the real world experienced by many school dropouts. Because of this, I remain highly motivated to researching, collecting, and pulling together information to help educators better understand and prevent students from dropping out and to intervene with teens who have already dropped out. ***We can do better!***

When students feel disconnected and discouraged, they become vulnerable to making choices that can be destructive in the short and long term. Without having a personal connection to at least one encouraging adult in the school, these students often become easy targets for negative peer influence and/or dangerous relationships with others. These choices eventually result in new difficulties that accumulate and can lead to even more uncertainty, including emotional and physical hardship. Or they can cause a student to turn inward and engage in self-harming behaviors. The key is early detection and preventive interventions so these emotional and physical hardships can be avoided.